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Making sense of quality teaching and learning in higher education in Ethiopia: Unfolding existing realities for future promises

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Abstract

Current approaches for assessing the quality of teaching and learning in higher education focus solely on compliance and accountability, and use quantitative measures that serve as indicators of institutional effectiveness and efficiency, yet whether such approaches have linked to instructional activities or students learning in universities are not clearly known. Moreover, while quality is a complex and multifaceted construct, its measurement using qualitative evidence of actual teaching and learning is generally minimal. This study fills this gap by examining broadly the perceptions of a variety of stakeholders on the quality of teaching and learning, and assessment and review experiences in higher education in Ethiopia. Here the main focus was to acquire an understanding of the existing realities in relation to these issues. For this, the study uses a qualitative case study design collecting primary data from interviews with 4 senior managers and 4 education quality experts, and focus-groups with 6 teachers and 26 students, and exploring secondary sources. The findings of this study suggest that recent quality improvement efforts are piecemeal and more geared towards quality assurance than improvement. Most quality concerns, assessment and review practices seemed to result in little more than formal reporting and were implemented very haphazardly. It, therefore, appears from the analysis of the qualitative data that there have been less visible quality improvements and numerous challenges. This study recommends a functioning internal system, formative assessment, and the support and ownership of those who work in the sector as crucial for the implementation of quality improvement.

Keywords

Ethiopia, Higher education, Quality Teaching and Learning, quality assurance, quality improvement

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Background

In the higher-education landscape, quality assessment has been a constant pressure, mainly due to a paradoxical tension that appears between internally driven quality improvement efforts and practices and external quality assurance agencies' calls for accountability (Ewell 2009; Harvey & Williams 2010). The underlying reason for this tension lies in the discrepancy between the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that spur engagement with quality assessment (Borden 2010). While a commitment to practicality may trigger quality improvement (Hernandez et al. 2014), extrinsic motivations, such as fitting with external quality requirements or securing funds, drive accountability (Harvey 2005).

Accountability requires demonstrating evidence of conformity with an established standard, and its main target is "to look as good as possible, regardless of the underlying performance" (Ewell, 2009, p. 8). In contrast, improvement involves an opposite rewarding scheme, since the triggering force for improvement is deficiencies in performance and genuine interest in and commitment to detecting and reporting them and taking actions to remedy them (Menz & Jungic 2015). Hence, genuinely examining deficiencies is the main objective to ensure improvement (Houston 2007).

Conducting improvement-driven quality assessment involves a very different approach than does conducting quality assessment for the purposes of external accountability. Improvement-led quality assessment entails a bottom-up, faculty-driven, formative approach with multiple integrated measures of both quantitative and qualitative aspects of program-specific activities and outcomes that are geared towards context-specific actions (Ewell 2009). Contrary to this, accountability-driven quality assessment requires summative, externally driven, top-down, standardised quantitative measures that are used for public communication (Harvey & Newton 2007).

It has been strongly argued in the literature that external quality assurance mechanisms have failed to simultaneously serve improvement and accountability (Ewell 2007; Harvey & Williams 2010). Part of the argument is that accountability procedures might be underpinned by an imperative to make higher education more cost-efficient, rather than to improve quality (Harvey 2005; Lomas 2004). Many have criticised quality assurance for the very reason that it establishes externally imposed definitions of quality (McKay & Kember 1999) that do not actively involve teachers and students in the quality-assurance process (Newton 2000; Ulrich 2001). In response, some scholars have begun to argue that quality improvement needs a movement beyond definitions and technical processes, one that pays attention to good institutional practices and processes (Stensaker 2008).

The teaching context in higher education in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, higher education is given a central position in the country's efforts to eradicate poverty. Part of this endeavour is concerned with improving the quality and employability of university graduates (MOE 2010, 2015a, 2015b). Following the establishment of a national quality-assurance agency and the government's growing commitment to standards-based reform (Teshome & Kebede 2010), ensuring quality has become the common practice for dealing with problems of quality in higher education. Through rhetoric and spirited debates, many suggest that establishing a quality-assurance system and aggressively working on new reform initiatives is what is needed to fix Ethiopia's chronic problems regarding higher-education quality (Yizengaw 2007).

In response to this, different reform efforts have been implemented in the undergraduate curricula, including renewal of the curriculum with a modular approach to instruction, outcome-based learning assessment and the European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (Dinsa et al. 2014). Also, the Education and Training Policy emphasises the provision and appropriate use of educational facilities, technology, materials, environment, organisation and management as important prerequisites for the quality of teaching and learning processes (FDRE 1994). As stipulated in Article 20(1) of the Higher Education Proclamation, "The medium of instruction in any institution, except possibly in language studies other than the English language, shall be English" (FDRE 2009, p.4987).

However, according to a recent report (ESDP p.v), evidence suggests a shortage of teachers with postgraduate qualifications. This results in the qualification mix of academic staff not being up to the standard set by the Ministry of Education. While the Ministry anticipates having a ratio of 0:70:30 (bachelor's, master's and doctorate), so far only a ratio of 27:58:15 has been achieved (MOE 2015a). Similarly, Belachew et al. (2016) found institutional evidence indicating similar deficiencies in the five-year trend of staff composition in one Ethiopian university. As a result, in some disciplines, undergraduate students are taught by staff with only a bachelor's degree.

Quality in Ethiopian higher education

As a result of the continuing expansion of higher education in Ethiopia, vigorous challenges have been placed upon its academic communities (Areaya 2010; Assefa 2008; Semela 2011). Ashcroft and Rayner (2011) reveal the tensions between conflicting issues like "resources versus expansion; autonomy versus 'government knows best'; the country's needs for a professional workforce versus the need to maintain standards".

Currently, there is an increased demand for quality assurance in the Ethiopian higher-education system (Teshome & Kebede 2010), but this relies on certifying quality in retrospect (Tadesse 2015). Moreover, quantitative measures only indicate trends, rather than giving insights into the quality of different programs (HERQA 2006). There is also a tendency on the part of university management to fully engage academic developers in quality assurance, rather than in their original mandate of quality improvement (Cantrell 2010). Studies show that the role of quality assessment and review in Ethiopian higher education is mixed and uncertain (Assefa 2008; Zerihun et al. 2012).

Current approaches for assessing the quality of teaching and learning focus solely on compliance and accountability, and use quantitative measures that serve as indicators of institutional effectiveness and efficiency. However, whether such approaches can be linked to instructional activities or students learning in universities is not clearly known (Tadesse 2015). Moreover, while quality is a complex and multifaceted construct, its measurement using qualitative evidence of actual teaching and learning is generally minimal. Most quality concerns and assessment and review practices are haphazardly implemented and seemed to result in little more than formal reporting. Therefore, this study adopted a qualitative approach to explain the views of various stakeholders about issues of quality teaching and learning in Ethiopian higher education. The purpose of this study was to describe the studied university and its context, and other institutional factors and conditions that study participants suggested were related to quality teaching and learning.

Research design and methods

Research design

This study used a qualitative case-study design. This approach was selected because it has the capacity to provide thick descriptions of the issue under study (Baxter & Jack 2008; Creswell 2009; Yin 2003), and the capacity to capture differences in perspective (Creswell et al. 2007). The emphasis was to obtain a holistic view about quality teaching and learning, search for patterns and develop assertions that can be used to capture an in-depth understanding of quality teaching and learning in the context of Ethiopian higher education based on multiple stakeholders' perspectives.

Participant selection

We used purposive sampling to select the study participants: targeting those who could best inform the research questions and enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study; that is, quality teaching and learning in Ethiopian higher education. Hence, one of the most important tasks in the study-design phase was to identify appropriate participants who could inform important facets and perspectives related to the quality of teaching and learning.

Two colleges of the institution studied – the College of Natural Sciences and College of Social Sciences and Law – were involved in this study. The study participants were 20 students (eight women and 12 men); six teachers (two women and four men); two college deans and two department heads, grouped as senior managers; and four experts in education quality. The student and teacher participants represented their groups at the college level, and some of the women participants were chosen for their roles as active representatives of women at the university; these participants were selected because they had a direct link with the issues being investigated. Throughout the results and discussion session of this paper, students are signified by (S), teachers by (T), senior managers by (SM) and education-quality experts by (EQE). The study was conducted in accordance with the standard ethical clearance procedures of the School of Education and the University of Queensland, and interviews and focus-group discussions were audio-recoded and transcribed.

Instruments of data collection

Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted one-on-one with senior managers and education-quality experts at the university, and with external education-quality experts from the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) and the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia. The main purpose interviewing these participants was to explore the existing practices, challenges and paradoxes in quality teaching and learning in higher education, and particularly in undergraduate programs.

Focus-group discussions

Focus group guiding questions were prepared in advance. The sampled teacher participants represented at college level participated in a single focus group discussion. The points covered in the focus-group discussions for both teachers and students were similar in substance to the interview questions. We conducted separate focus groups for students and teachers. Each student focus group consisted of eight to ten student participants.

Data-analysis procedures

This study used thematic analysis, incorporating a description of the context and the processes observed, and an explanation of the elements explored in depth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data analysis was ongoing during the research process; this allowed us to condense an extensive amount of information into a more manageable format and compare findings within and among transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To organise the data, we read through it line by line and thought about the meaning of each word, sentence and idea (Creswell, 2012). We triangulated multiple data sources to produce a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon being studied.

Ethical issues

Before the data collection, the purposes of the study were explained to the participants, and they were asked for their written consent to participate in the interview and focus-group discussion. The participants were also informed that the information they provided would only be used for the purposes of the study, and that it would not be given to a third party. In addition, the researchers ensured confidentiality by identifying the participants by codes rather than names.

Results and discussion

The first theme denotes the ideal state of quality teaching and learning. The second theme refers to teaching and learning as it actually occurs. The third theme is good practices, challenges and consequences. These three themes have been further divided into two to three sub-themes that decompose the data within each theme into more-specific areas of concern. Appendix 1 summarises the themes the responses of each participant group.

Ideal quality teaching and learning in Ethiopian higher education

Defining characteristics of ideal quality teaching and learning

This theme deals with the study participants' perceptions of the defining characteristics of an ideal quality teaching and learning experience, including descriptions of the approach used, the expected outcomes, the instructional environment, the teachers' roles and the students' involvement in the process. The study participants described the instructional approach they desired as an active and participatory approach; their descriptions included terms such as student-centred, participatory or interactive instruction, learning by doing, practical or hands-on learning, dialogue and problem-solving approaches, independent learning and group learning. These are consistent with the variants of contemporary approaches to teaching and learning (Freed & Huba 2000), also called pedagogies of engagement (Smith et al. 2005) or active learning methods (Biggs 2001). The study participants also noted additional concerns that would need to be addressed for the successful realisation of these instructional approaches.

In this study, as in others (Alemu 2014; Piper 2009; Rieckmann 2012), quality teaching is considered to be student-centred and supported by information and communication technologies. The provision of necessary facilities encourages independent learning (Johnson 2015). As SM1 commented, libraries should be well equipped with better resource collections, including internet service and e-resources, so that students have what they need to complete their assignments to a high standard. SM2 added, *"Higher education in Ethiopia should encourage students to learn independently. Of course, the instructor should give guidelines, show them the direction, and then*

the students should do more about the job, and internalize what they learn." EQE1 similarly said, *"In the higher-education context, students learn best when they put their mind and hands in action rather than simply absorbing, when they work together, when they produce something by themselves rather than expecting [something] ready-made from teachers."*

These descriptions suggest that study participants recognise the importance of teaching and learning supported by information and communication technologies and effective interaction with the content, fellow students and teachers during the learning process. Interestingly, none of participants characterised the traditional, or lecture-based, approach as desirable. For example, S2 and SM1 commented that teaching is not "spoon feeding", where the instructor lectures and then the students read the lecture notes and just sit for and pass the exam. Education-quality expert EQE3 said that *"unless students see the applications of various theoretical concepts they have learned in theory, at the end of the day, they will [only] be theoreticians"*. Thus the participants' assumptions and beliefs are best represented by Barr and Tagg's paradigm model, which emphasises a change in focus from teaching to learning (Barr & Tagg 1995). This is central to fostering key competencies through university teaching and learning (Rieckmann 2012).Moreover, it may represent a major shift in the pedagogic practices of teachers as well as in the nature of students' engagement within the university (Bryson & Hand 2007).

Components of desired quality teaching and learning

The most common themes of quality teaching and learning suggested by the different participants included the need for more experienced teachers, adequate textbooks and reference materials and better laboratory equipment and facilities. They also focused on the nature of quality teaching and learning as a process. For example, the students valued understandable learning content, a suitable learning environment, the availability of necessary learning materials and proper time for learning as important ingredients of quality teaching and learning. Virtually all student participants in this study asserted that quality teaching is student-centred teaching, which signifies active learning, the participation of all students and the attainment of good results. In the same way, they viewed quality learning as including learning material that is understandable a suitable learning environment and proper time for learning. Student participants agreed that quality teaching includes starting on time from the first day, keeping to the schedule and syllabus and early provision of handouts and teachers' support.

Parallel to the students' view, teacher participants perceived that discovery learning, the association of theories with practice, appraisal mechanisms, provision of relevant support and authentic assessment as important considerations in quality teaching and learning practices. One of the teacher participants from the college of Social Sciences and Law (T5) stressed that *"students' self-determination and readiness to learn do really matter"*. The other teacher participant from the same college (T4) pointed out that students' independent learning and intrinsic motivation are crucial components of quality teaching and learning.

The view of SM3 on this matter was similar to the views stated above:

> *Ideally, at the university, professors facilitate students' learning through providing them some guidance on the major areas of the subject. And students are expected to learn by themselves. They are supposed to organise their own learning in such a way that they can prepare their own notes, make presentations and do assignments.*

In support of this, EQE3 said, *'Teaching is a guide [that] the teacher highlights to stimulate students for further study. Hence, learning has to be very well integrated with knowledge and practical skills."* These views reflect a broader perspective linking the components of teaching and learning with the job market. The most advanced definition offered by this group of participants focused on the relevance of teaching and learning to the level of the economy. The stated essential ingredients included "alignment" between the qualities of the graduates and the market demand. One of the education-quality experts (EQE2) noted:

> *As for me, quality teaching and learning has different dimensions. For example, teaching and learning should be relevant to the level of market of the economy, so there must be an alignment between the qualities of the graduates and the market demand. At the same time there must be alignment between the objectives, the content, the learning experiences and the assessment. So, we need to set our objectives based on the needs of the external environment.*

The other education-quality expert (EQE1) had a similar opinion:

> *I think the first thing is the curriculum. The curriculum has to be need-based. The curriculum has to be related to the national demand, and all the components of the curriculum should be aligned. The next thing is the process; for example, having qualified teachers, and again when the learning process engages the students. Lastly, the assessment itself – in that case, if the assessment method itself is set towards achieving the goals, then we can say there is quality teaching and learning.*

Quality teaching and learning has been associated with the nation's economic and social development (Marginson 2007), and extended beyond the attainment of course objectives and mastery to preparing the graduates for the world of work (Rieckmann 2012). Most of the participants in this study agreed that the expected outcome of quality teaching and learning is primarily to encourage students' independent learning, and thus ultimately to produce competent graduates (Kelly 2014; Spronken-Smith et al. 2015). Moreover, the majority agreed that the teacher should act as a facilitator, giving guidelines and direction to students. This potentially determines teaching quality, particularly in the 21st century (Hyslop-Margison & Dale 2010). Similarly, most of the participants highlighted that the students should be active participants in the process of instruction, independently accomplishing the learning tasks with minimum support from their teacher. While all these were their perceived ideals for quality teaching and learning, they recognised that instruction as it was actually practised was quite different.

Actual teaching and learning in Ethiopian higher education

This section discusses traditional forms of teaching and learning in Ethiopia to give some background to current practice, followed by a discussion of existing practices, some current quality improvement initiatives and challenges in quality teaching and learning.

The tradition

Although currently there are some initiatives for change both nationally and institutionally to improve the quality of teaching and learning, as the participants of this study affirmed, so far the trend has been that teachers have not attended classes regularly, and that their preferred teaching technique has been the lecture. This is in agreement with the literature in this area. Empirical evidence has long suggested that lecturing does not promote independent thinking; nor does it help

change students' attitudes stimulate their interest (Hennessy & Evans 2006; Zerihun et al. 2012). One of the education-quality experts (EQE1) highlighted: *"Traditionally, it used to be the case that classes start quite late and then the teacher overburdens students with make-up classes towards the end of the semester."* Similarly, a senior manager of the College of Natural Sciences (SM1) stated: *"By tradition, it has been the case that the students would not seriously do reading until a month or two weeks remained before the final exam."* Thus, students were not really learning so as to master the subject, but merely to pass the exam.

Current initiatives

Attempts are being made to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the institution studied. One of the education quality experts (EQE1) said, *"Nowadays, the university is determined to [follow] the principle of first-day-first class".* Colleges and departments now encourage all their instructors to show up ready to teach seriously beginning with the very first class. One of the senior managers (SM1) stated that now there is a guideline, which was endorsed by the Senate, and distributed to every instructor to make sure that they start assessing their students beginning from the second week. By and large, it is now the general standard to have at least five continuous assessments per semester.

Undergraduate curricula in Ethiopian public universities have changed with the endorsement of the nationally harmonised competency-based modular curricula (Dinsa et al. 2014); however, actual practice in universities shows that the implementation of these curricula has not been consistent, and much teaching remains largely teacher-centred, traditional and lecture-based. This practice is counter to the methodology of competency-based curriculum, which requires shifting from teacher-centred to student-centred approaches (MOE 2013); this potentially damages teaching quality in Ethiopian universities (Russell & Slater 2011). Most of the study participants thought that improvements in teaching quality were problematic because of a rapid increase in the number of students without a matching increase in university resources.

Existing good practices, challenges and consequences

The student participants of this study acknowledged the presence of some teachers in their respective colleges who taught courses in accordance with the schedule presented in the course outline, encouraged students' participation in class, prepared reasonable exams and assignments and considered the students' ability in determining the weight of the course content and assessment tasks. Also, the majority of the students expressed appreciation for the provision of handouts, worksheets and better laboratory facilities. Also, they perceived the learning experience in community-based education courses as significantly helping them to gain meaningful learning and problem-solving skills. Consistent with the literature in this field, students made clear that they noticed when their teachers cared about their interests and needs (Haseloff 2007; Hernandez et al. 2014). This suggests that teachers should demonstrate that they care about students by placing the learners at the centre of the educational process (Law 2010). With this primary focus on caring, teachers can engage students actively in the learning process (Lumpkin 2007). This ensures that student engagement is nurtured in a caring environment, which is essential for learning experiences to be fun, meaningful and enduring (Rodríguez-Gómez & Ibarra-Sáiz 2015).

In contrast, the student participants also said that the quality of their learning was diminished because of poor resources, less concern paid by the institution, teachers' poor pedagogical skills and bias in marking. For instance, some teachers did not cover the course content in class; instead, they offered students handouts and transferred the responsibility of covering the content to the students by giving them reading assignments. As some students stated, even some teachers download materials from the internet to use as handouts, although the contents have no relevance

to the course. One student participant from the College of Social Science and Law (S15) commented that *"some teachers appear in class just because they are obliged to do so since they are paid, maybe? These types of teachers start the course very late or even quit in between and then rush for the last few classes towards the end of the semester."* A student participant from the College of Natural Sciences (S2) continued, *"Sometimes, they may finish the course content in two or three periods with a disorganised and insufficient lecture, I would say, a quick lecture picking a phrase from each subtitle."* This may be followed by a lengthy handout and an inappropriately demanding exam.

A student participant from the College of Social Sciences and Law (S14) noted the presence of teachers' biases, particularly in marking. Another student participant (S26) commented, *"Some teachers did not like students. We are afraid of them since they are not concerned with students."* The other issue was lack of feedback. According to the student participants, many teachers did not give students feedback on their assessments; instead, students only saw their scores. Students commented that they felt they could not complain about exams or discuss them with their teachers. The education-quality experts made similar comments. For example, EQE1 said, *"Teachers are bombarding students with information using Power Points rather than interactive lecture. Even in smart classrooms, where classrooms equipped with LCD [screens] and internet, teachers are using that mainly for the purpose of lecturing."* EQE4 commented about the teachers' lack of accountability: *"Teachers are very busy with part-time jobs. Due to this, they don't have time to devote [to teaching]. Thus, they often manage their courses with make-up classes, usually covered in a few days when the exam approaches."* Also, EQE3 highlighted the teachers' lack of pedagogical skills as one of the major impediments to quality teaching.

> *In some occasions, you may find teachers implementing small-group discussions; however, the tasks did not challenge [the students], as they required students only to recall information, and even sometimes students may not [have received] the necessary instructions. Hence, I can say there is misuse of small-group learning.*

In addition to this, EQE2 said, *"Assessment was shallow, in a sense that it did not promote students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills."* Teacher participants also admitted that their classrooms were teacher-centred nature and that they were incorrectly applying the concept of continuous assessment. However, they tended to place the blame for that on the students and the institution. One teacher from the College of Social Sciences and Law (T6) said:

> *I tried to use different active learning methods, but I can say I failed to do so since the students tend to be passive listeners, expecting everything from the teacher. I used to teach mostly with a teacher-centred approach, since most of my students tend to favour that, even in modularised courses.*

Most of the teachers said that large class sizes, students' lack of experience in using student-centred methods and continuous assessment during high school and their heavy workloads were some of the major factors hindering the implementation of student-centred approaches. However, the students, senior managers and EQEs attributed the this to the lack of pedagogical skills, misunderstanding of the reform ideals and misuses of student-centred teaching techniques.

The different study participant groups generally agreed that the students' learning was problematic. Teachers felt that students in their respective departments did not take learning seriously, and that students were assessment oriented, interested only in passing exams and earning good marks. Teachers assumed that students would cheat in exams and on assignments

(T4). Another teacher (T5) added, *"Students do not want to do laboratory work or spend their time doing assignments and other relevant activities. Unless you force them, they do not pay attention to their learning tasks."* Senior managers and education-quality experts expressed similar views. For example, EQE 4 said, *"The students' learning is predominantly rehearsing lecture notes, and they usually start reading [only] when the exam approaches. Also, they heavily depend on the lecture notes and seem totally committed to learning just to pass the exams."* EQE2 commented that quality learning is limited to the *"cognitive aspects, especially rote memory, and the students' time on task is very limited."*

One of the senior managers (SM4) highlighted that the students' academic competence upon university entry was poor. This concern is supported by the literature in this area. According to a recent report (ESDP V), many students enrolled in the undergraduate programs in Ethiopian universities with results below the 50% threshold set for the higher-education entrance examinations (MOE 2015a). In some disciplines, students enrolled in a university without being genuinely interested in the subject matter, and this affected their motivation to learn (Tadesse et al. 2016).

Students expressed a similar view. For example, a student (S2) in the College of Natural Sciences said:

> *The learning in class was mostly listening and writing notes. Also, we used to study in the library or with peers. Asking a peer is easier since a peer can easily understand my problems and also can devote his or her time to support me academically.*

Another student (S6) said, *"In my view, although I have theoretical knowledge, there is a serious problem with practical [knowledge], as we did not have ample opportunity to practice things we dealt with in theory. So, in this university we are gaining theoretical knowledge without practical [knowledge]*." The other potential challenge, as most of the study participants reported, related to limited resources and poor processes. One student (S2) commented, "*The library does not have enough books. Also, we didn't have adequate internet services. In the absence of these sometimes completing assignments on time is very difficult."* Similarly, student S11 said, *"In our institution, we did not have quality laboratory facilities."* Participants reported other challenges as well. SM4 and most of the teacher participants commented that some students cannot explain their ideas in English. Due to these and other reasons, students had negative feelings, particularly in terms of the practical components of the courses. While it is true that students of weak academic ability have the most difficulty in such situations, one student participant from the College of Natural Sciences (S4) noted that "*the end result was poor scores on exams for most students"*. Participants noted that it sometimes happened that students would score higher grades just by reading handouts or texts than students who devoted significant amounts of time to deeper learning (EQE2). However, two participants (SM1 & EQE1) noted that the presence of quality-assurance guidelines, a culture of annually reviewing quality and the use of a tracer study substantiates quality enhancement in terms of learning experience and continuous assessment practices.

In general, the study participants' responses reveal substantial reservations about the quality of teaching and learning in their respective programs. In fact, a decline in the quality of teaching and

learning is a common problem for many higher-education institutions around the globe (Hersh & Merrow 2015; Yigzaw et al. 2015). The root causes of this decline, as suggested by the results this study and others (Hernandez et al. 2014; Levine et al. 2008), are that at most universities the academic culture does not prioritise and foster meaningful learning. Consistent with current literature, the results of this study indicate that reform ideals may not be effective in bringing about lasting change in the provision of quality education in universities (Degago & Kaino 2015; Hernandez et al. 2014; Moges 2010; Piper 2009; Yigzaw et al. 2015).

Hence, universities in Ethiopia need to make a concerted effort to mitigate problems regarding quality. As one study participant said, universities need to improve things at the classroom level, specifically by using innovative teaching and assessment methods (EQE2). This is consistent with the literature in this field, highlighting the need for an increased emphasis on improvements in pedagogical methods (Conn 2014). Studies have found that to support such initiatives and generate more positive results in practice, hands-on work that enhances teachers' knowledge of the content and how to teach can be helpful, especially when that content is aligned with the local curriculum and policies (Darling-Hammond & Richardson 2009). A synthesis of current literature suggests that a context-specific pedagogic intervention that promotes the students' level of autonomy and accountability can have a significant effect on teachers' pedagogical practice and help students to become more confident with and accountable for learning (Nicholl et al. 2013; Pundak & Rozner 2008). These practices are in line with the Ethiopian higher-education policy. As stipulated in that policy, higher-education institutions are expected to undertake periodic academic audits and to follow rectify the deficiencies revealed by the audits (FDRE 2009).

Summary of key findings and conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, there seemed a general concern about the quality of teaching and learning in Ethiopian higher education. Participants expressed good intentions to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and noted them in others; however, these often failed to be translated into actual reality. Most of the time students attended lectures and their learning experiences were superficial. Moreover, the results of this study showed that there were several obstacles to the implementation of student-centred teaching and continuous assessment, and that both students and teachers were dissatisfied with the practice. These obstacles include an increase in enrolment without a matching increase in university capacity and resources and misalignment between the curricular components. For example, student participants stated that assessment tasks and exams are prepared without considering the learning objectives of the course. Similarly, quality-assessment efforts have not been linked well with appropriate quality improvement. Moreover, criteria and measures have focused on quality assurance opposed to quality improvement. Experiences at both the national and institutional levels have revealed that quality assurance is common in the Ethiopian higher-education landscape.

This study found that different higher-education stakeholder groups have different perspectives and views on quality teaching and learning. Although university senior managers and education-quality experts placed more trust in the establishment of policies and guidelines as crucial for quality and expect positive results, students and teachers were more concerned about the implementation of these policies and the negative outcomes that resulted. Study participants from

all groups observed good practice that encouraged quality teaching and learning, and agreed about what constitutes quality teaching and learning. Moreover, while they disagreed regarding the utility of student-centred teaching as a proposed teaching-learning model and the correct implementation of continuous assessment as a means of formative evaluation to improve learning, they generally agreed that the quality of teaching and learning was declining, although they differed on the factors accounting for that.

In general, there is the quality deficit surrounding teaching and learning in the context of Ethiopian higher education is widening. This is attributable mainly to the lack of stringent quality-management systems and a mismatch between increased enrolments and institutional capacity and resources. Moreover, institutional emphasis is on external compliance and accountability rather than on a real commitment to improve. The different quality-assessment experiences have failed to produce positive results, since there is misalignment between quality-assessment practices and actual improvement, with the net effect being that there has been little visible improvement in the quality of the higher-education system.

However, the literature suggests that accountability-driven compliance culture is proliferating in Ethiopia, both nationally and institutionally. The way forward for better quality teaching and learning in Ethiopian higher education requires multiple focus and actions that together constitute a paradigm shift from accountability to transformation. This paper recommends quality initiatives for Ethiopian higher education through applying a new, improvement-led model. This model is mainly characterised by internally driven initiatives that apply research-based tools and context-appropriate intervention packages. To this effect, staff development on how to use different pedagogic models, student empowerment in the required skills for quality learning and institutional supports (making the needed resources available and providing on-site professional supports) are critical (Tadesse & Gillies 2015; Tadesse & Melese 2016). Figure 1 presents the major components of the proposed intervention model.

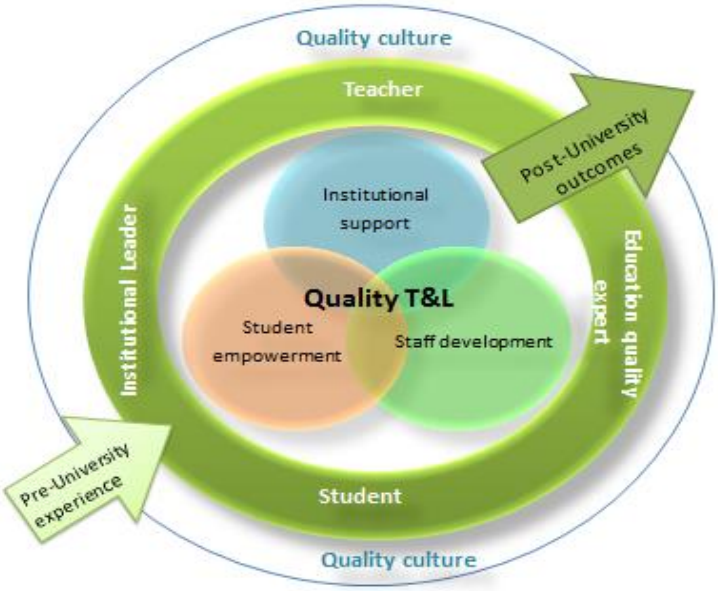

Figure 1. Improvement-led quality-improvement model
Note: "T&L" refers to teaching and learning.

This model sets out a more realistic process of continuous improvement, placing the responsibility on those who can affect change, and offering them ownership and control over the improvement agenda while engendering a responsive and responsible approach. Teaching and learning centres, like the Academic Development and Resource Centre (ADRC) in the Ethiopian higher-education context, has immense potential to stimulate practitioners towards the effective design and implementation of quality improvement through assisting and closely cooperating with teachers and students (Chisholm et al. 2012). It is believed that such work is in stark contrast to quality-assurance measures and far more likely to be supported by students and instructors.

Through repeatedly implementing these intervention measures, the model promotes more-positive relationships between students and teachers and more interaction among the students themselves, thereby changing the academic norm and leading to better student engagement and learning. The key elements of this model include a shift in focus to transforming both teachers and students into more active and cooperative participants in the quality-improvement process and the development of an active and cooperative learning environment. Hence the model entails empowering and enhancing individuals and making the learning environment more interactive and inclusive. By doing so, the model promises the involvement of not only teachers and students, but also institutional leaders and education-quality experts in the quality-improvement equation.

Limitations

This study focused on one public university in Ethiopia, documenting the perceptions of different stakeholders in relation to quality teaching and learning to provide an in-depth look at the bigger picture of quality considering the desired and actual state of quality teaching and learning. Thus, the transferability of its findings may be limited. Nevertheless, the findings can help to clarify the reasons hindering the proper implementation of quality teaching and learning in other institutions, and may be applicable in other contexts as well.

Implications

It is one thing to establish a quality-assurance system, and quite another to build a culture of quality and continuous improvement. Quality improvement is a process that is developed by the university leaders and manager's involvement, complemented by widespread support from university academics so that it can be owned, and taken seriously, by the university community. This ensures joint ownership of quality improvement and its persistence within the institution's academic culture.

Teaching and learning centres, like ADRCs in the Ethiopian higher-education context, have the potential to make immense contributions in developing and validating research-based tools for quality assessment, and in the initiation and development of formative quality improvement. This is also true internationally, as this type of university-wide centre initiates staff-development opportunities that focus on student learning and helping teachers develop the pedagogical skills to teach specific kinds of content (Fotinatos 2016). Also, they provide the needed support structure for students, teachers, courses and departments (Hernandez et al. 2014; Menz & Jungic 2015). It is believed that such work is in stark contrast to quality-assurance measures and far more strongly supported by the university community.

Declining quality is a problem for many higher-education institutions around the globe (Ben-Peretz 2011; Molla 2013), and many factors contribute to this (Craig et al. 2013). This study is

unique in its focus on outlining the intended and actual state of quality teaching and learning in higher education, its identification of key enabling factors and conditions affecting quality and the outcomes of quality-improvement initiatives. The findings of this study have a number of practical and policy implications for Ethiopian and other higher-education systems in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. While some of the identified factors might be seen as institution-specific – for example, the presence of a policy or qualified academic staff (Woldie 2013) –others can be found in most universities – for example, implementation gaps and resource depletion (Schweisfurth 2011; Sharan 2010). The study identified the structural and cultural obstacles that may impede improvements in the quality of teaching and learning, and some common intervention strategies aimed at quality improvement. The outcomes of this study are useful for those who desire to encourage student participation and effective classroom practices, and increase the national impact of higher-education institutions in general. The findings can help practitioners, administrators and EQEs to internalise and appreciate the importance of quality teaching and learning and arrange comprehensive and effective measures to address the factors associated with it.

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Appendix 1. Views and Perspectives of the Participant Groups

Issue	Respondents			
	Students (S)	Teachers (T)	Senior Managers (SM)	Education Quality Expert (EQE)
Desired quality teaching	Student-centred, teachers playing the role of facilitators. Facilitating students learning, for example, give guidelines, and show them (students) the direction.	Student-centred, teachers playing the role of facilitators.	Student-centred, teachers playing the role of facilitators.	Student-centred, teachers playing the role of facilitators, alignment between the curricular components
Actual quality teaching	Predominantly teacher-centred.	Predominantly teacher-centred.	Predominantly teacher-centred.	Predominantly teacher-centred, misaligned, limited to the cognitive aspect, especially rote memory, Bombarding students with information
Desired quality learning	Independent learning to produce competent graduates.	Students actively involved. Positive learning experiences lead to mastery learning.	Students actively involved and learning independently. Positive learning experiences lead to mastery learning. Practice-based learning.	Students active involvement Positive learning experiences leading to mastery learning
Actual quality learning	A mix of both superficial and exam-oriented learning; for example, mostly listening to lectures, writing notes and studying in the library or with peers. A mix of engaging and mastery learning.	A mix of both superficial and exam-oriented learning.	A mix of superficial, exam-oriented and theoretical learning. Students' academic background and preparedness inadequate.	A mix of both superficial and exam-oriented learning, predominantly rehearsing lecture notes and reading when exam approaches,
Positive factors	Quality teaching characterised by encouragement and support for students' learning.	Independent learning.	The presence of guidelines at the department and college levels. Better continuous assessment after adopting this guideline.	The presence of guidelines at the department and college levels.
Negative factors	Teacher- and institution-related factors; for example, blaming the teacher for perceived inadequacies. The institution places less emphasis on quality.	Student- and institution-related factors (blaming the student or the institution for perceived inadequacies). For example, students can	A mix of factors.	A mix of factors, assessment is shallow, in a sense that it does not promote students critical thinking and problem solving skills,

	Provision of constructive feedback is consistently neglected.	be characterised as passive listeners, and accustomed to cheating in exams and on assignments.		
Implementation challenge	Constrained by depleted resources. Teachers' lack of accountability; for example, some teachers do not cover the course contents as specified in the syllabus, and give disorganised and inadequate lectures. - Misuse of continuous assessment, such as downloading materials from the internet to use as hand-outs for a reading assignment or giving exams downloaded from the internet. Giving excessively demanding exams. Teachers' biases, particularly in marking and scoring. Teachers are unapproachable and brusque, and do not provide feedback for their students. The learning objectives and assessments are misaligned.	Constrained by depleted resources.	Constrained by depleted resources. Lack of accountability from both students and teachers.	Constrained by depleted resources, Teachers' lack of accountability, for example, Often manage courses with make-up classes, Teachers lack of pedagogical skills, for example, misuse of small group learning
Good practice	Some teachers offer effective encouragement and support. Some contexts provide a community-based education experience.		New reform initiatives and the establishment of guidelines for reform; for example, continuous assessment. Establishing smart classes. Tracer study. First-day-first-class.	New reform initiatives, the establishment of guidelines for reform. Conducting annual review on a regular basis, Tracer study First-day-first-class
Negative outcomes	Poor student engagement. Poor scores on exams for most students. Dissatisfaction with the practice of continuous assessment.	Dissatisfaction with the practice of continuous assessment. Lack of interest in new reform initiatives	Superficial learning, or disengagement. Poor academic performance.	Superficial learning, or Time on task was minimal, teaching and learning is limited to the cognitive aspect,

	such as continuous assessment. Poor academic performance.	especially rote memory, Poor academic performance